Lioi, Anthony. "The Destruction of the Sky: Virtual Worlds as Refuge." *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 97–122. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474219730.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:11 UTC.

Copyright © Anthony Lioi 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Destruction of the Sky: Virtual Worlds as Refuge

*In which I pursue the trope of the broken sky as an expression of the urge to seek **refuge** from **predation** by negating the cosmos itself. The nerd love for virtual worlds of literature, film, and games stands in tension with the nerd fear of exile to an unreal space. This is a special case of the tension within postmodernism itself about the status of art as virtual world. Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard represent the negative pole of this dynamic with theories of postmodernism as schizophrenia and virtual worlds as simulacra, respectively. Jane McGonigal, author of Reality Is Broken, represents the positive pole with her theory of games as remedy for the ills of “RL” (real life) environments. In this framework, the broken sky represents the false world of political oppression and the true world damaged by human ignorance, stupidity, and greed. The Animatrix argues that the false world of the Matrix trilogy arose from the human destruction of the true sky during a war with sentient machines. The **machines** fashioned the Matrix as a response to a weaponized sky deployed to deprive machines of citizenship. This injustice of the broken sky is presaged in Thomas Pynchon’s Bleeding Edge, which parallels the agon of **nerd culture** at the dawn of the Internet and the plight of a wildlife refuge in New York Harbor, impinged on all sides by the **effluvia** of capitalism. Finally, resistance to the false sky is dramatized in Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games, in which the fascist arena collapses due to an alliance of enslaved children. This resistance affirms the earth-under-the-stars as the refuge of a chastened cosmopolis.*

I asked for a telescope for my thirteenth birthday. An Astroscan, in particular, a small reflector that was portable, easy to use, and good for deep-sky objects: comets, nebulae, and galaxies. As an astronomy geek in suburban New Jersey,

I needed a scope that was good at collecting the light of faint objects. Though I lived near the shore, in the far suburbs of New York City, there was enough light pollution to make it impossible to see the Milky Way. Point the Astroscan at Sagittarius, however, and thousands of stars wheeled into view. Likewise, the rings of Saturn, the Galilean satellites of Jupiter, the craters of the Moon, and the Orion Nebula. The sky seemed deep and full, a dark beauty that enchanted the world. Still, I did not see a comet for nearly a decade. Finally, I understood the stories of Halley's Comet as portent of war and disaster. Comets move fast, change shape, and look like nothing else. Amateur astronomy prepared me for the Heaven's Gate UFO cult, whose members killed themselves in March 1997, when Comet Hale-Bopp passed close to Earth. The group believed that a UFO was hidden by the comet, that this craft would take them out of their corrupt, mortal bodies, away from the false rulers of this world, to a better place (Zeller 42). They had only to kill themselves to get there. Benjamin Zeller, who wrote the book on Heaven's Gate, notes the metaphysical and cosmological dualism of the movement. I considered their philosophy a reboot of the world-weariness of the late antique Mediterranean, a modern Gnosticism. I felt for Heaven's Gate: they loved the sky but despaired of earth, a judgment I did not share. Zeller's account revealed the connection between them and me: they were *Star Trek* fans. They called themselves the "Away Team"—the group that "beams down" to alien worlds—implying that their true home was on the ship, that they had been stranded here (Zeller 1). They were stellar cosmopolitans of a certain kind, the nerds that kill themselves in the name of a heavenly refuge.

The need for sanctuary unites nerd ecology with wildlife conservation. In the American system of environmental conservation, a refuge, unlike a national park, preserves habitat necessary for wildlife without reference to aesthetic value. When Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872, the federal government's intention was to protect the geysers and hot springs, though "wanton destruction" of animals was also forbidden (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "Short History of the Refuge System" n.p.). In contrast, the first national wildlife refuge, on Florida's Pelican Island, was set aside in 1903 to protect the habitat of the brown pelican after President Teddy Roosevelt acted against the steady loss of wading bird populations to plume hunters ("Short History"). The idea of refuge builds on the older idea of sanctuary

as a space preserved from the power of civic authorities: the laws of the city preserve the refuge from becoming the city. The refuge presupposes a crisis in the prior order of nature brought on by unconstrained development. This understanding was popularized by Rachel Carson in her series “Conservation in Action,” written when she was a staff biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service. The service still quotes her on its website. In this passage, Carson alerts readers to the Wild Goose Sign as the indicator of a refuge: “Wherever you meet this sign, respect it. It means that the land behind the sign has been dedicated by the American people to preserving, for themselves and their children, as much of our native wildlife as can be retained along with our modern civilization” (Carson, “Introduction”). The refuge demands respect from the visitor because of the threat of irreparable loss of animals and plants, though the rhetoric of self-restraint serves human posterity first, a gesture of citizens protecting the future for children. This motivation is depicted as natural and patriotic, even as it is directed to the restoration of “the conditions that wild things need in order to live.” Carson’s account of refuges seamlessly combines American interests with the interests of wildlife: there is an implicit eco-cosmopolitanism at work there. Though national parks are also considered to be part of the national heritage, their exceptional status as more beautiful places sets them apart from the city as wilderness. National wildlife refuges often form at the edge of the metropolis: the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey and the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge form a kind of animal suburb around New York City. They communicate with the metropole; they are wild but not apart from it. They are expressions of civilization and civilization’s self-restraint. Their creatures occupy a liminal status, neither citizens nor aliens.

This status explains why the rhetoric of refuge slips into nerd discourse in the first place. Something less than the able-bodied American citizen, nerds are products of civilization that require protection against it. As a monster that ought to aspire to normality, the nerd is visibly distinct from peers but linked to them as a point of comparison. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz describes the titular hero in these terms. He is a genius of popular culture: he speaks fictional languages, loves “monsters” and “spaceships” and “mutants,” and possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of comic books and fantasy fiction (Diaz 21). He cannot blend in: “Dude wore his nerdiness like a

Jedi wears a lightsaber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he's wanted to" (21). There is a fantastic aspect to his difference: it does not resemble sexual, racial, or physiognomic otherness alone. It is aggressive: it creates another kind of space around itself. It is aesthetically excessive, like the funky and the fabulous, incapable of self-restraint or disguise. This aesthetic power is also a vulnerability: by standing out, it attracts negative attention. Oscar needs a refuge, but finds it only in culture itself. He has no physical environment where he is safe from criticism or bodily harm:

[B]eing a reader/fanboy (for lack of a better term) helped him get through the rough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out on the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did. Victimized by the other boys—punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses and brand-new books from Scholastic, at the cost of fifty cents each, torn apart before his very eyes. (22)

This passage highlights yet another trouble with refuge: it must be restored in the face of destruction. Threats to the wildlife refuge are countered by environmental law, but Oscar's refuge is protected by no law. Though his sister Lola, also a reader, is sympathetic, their mother kicks him out of the house, wanting him to play with his tormenters like a normal boy. The tension between the safety of the imagination and vulnerability of the body in social space produces a metaphysical dualism that recalls Heaven's Gate, and Oscar does attempt suicide in college. The dynamic of nerd refuge reproduces, at the level of the individual, the threat of extinction held at bay at the level of species by the wildlife refuge. Nerd culture is obsessed with the creation and maintenance of refuge for these reasons. This chapter traces representations of refuge that explore the rupture between the mental and the material as a crisis of cosmopolis. This crisis generates the desire to escape the unjust world by any means necessary; it is figured by the trope of the broken sky. This is what happens when people like Oscar begin to tell their own stories. In the world of *The Matrix*, and its prequel, *The Animatrix*, the broken sky is the atmosphere of earth and the digital dome of the virtual world. In Thomas Pynchon's novel *Bleeding Edge*, digital and material skies are threatened alike by capitalism. In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the atmosphere was broken by a climate catastrophe in the distant past, but the fascist state of

Panem generates its own sky in the arena of the games. This kind of splitting is characteristic of postmodern art, and it produces paranoia about the virtual as the space of illusion and oppression that poses an existential dilemma for the construction of nerd refuges from the materials of the imagination.

Postmodern cultural theory has had a conflicted relationship to the idea of virtual worlds. In the most negative assessments, virtual worlds are depicted as false, deceptive, and schizoid. Jean Baudrillard's influential analysis of simulacra posits a developmental scheme in which simula, likenesses, get progressively worse: first, they are flawed representations of the real; then they obscure mundane reality; then they obscure the obscuring; and finally, they break free of reality altogether, which denotes, for Baudrillard, a cultural transition into states of political being and aesthetic perception entirely unrelated to truth. As a theory of knowledge, Baudrillard's position descends from Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which depicts pre-philosophical human knowledge as the understanding of shadows cast by fire on a cave wall. As a theory of being, his view descends, ontologically, from the *Timaeus*, in which the cosmos is depicted as a flawed material copy of a transcendent, immaterial idea. Aesthetically, it descends from the *Republic*, Book IX, and the critique of the tragic poets as liars who corrupt the young; psychologically from the *Phaedrus*, and the Egyptian priest's fear that writing as a technology will corrupt memory and perception. However, for Baudrillard, postmodern modes of economic and cultural production radicalize the problem because of the "precession of simulacra," a process through which the same facts can be spun, like the axes of different toy tops, into separate micro-worlds that are unaware of each other and unfalsifiable to their inhabitants (Baudrillard 1–42). From the perspective of nerd ecology, Baudrillard holds some promise of helping us to understand the relationship of the adolescent micro-worlds of school and home to the process of nerd genesis. The school and the home can act as simulacra whose function is to norm the nerd child into a representation of the healthy, sociable, obedient child who will reproduce the social order without question. It is only within such simulated worlds that children can be turned into prey, garbage, and machines. Further, the theory of simulacra offers a description of the delusory manner in which the American suburb seems to float free of its socio-ecological context, just as neoliberal models of economic growth make the human economy appear to float free of the natural

economy on which it depends. The problem with Baudrillardian theory arises when its descriptions are taken as absolute or monolithic, inducing a paranoid sense that simulated worlds are prisons from which there is no escape. Though this perspective is logically self-consuming—it would not be possible to name simulacra as such if they were imperceptible or absolute—it also informs the most influential critique of postmodern aesthetics, first articulated in Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" (1983) and developed in *Postmodernism* (1992).

For Jameson, paranoia, or the mind beside itself, is the essential aesthetic experience of postmodern culture (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 111). Postmodern art in particular, and cultural production in general, are characterized by a deracination of perception from context. The aesthetic of fragmentation, which began with the Modernist avant-garde as a symptom of, then protest against, the ravages of World War I, becomes the norm in postmodernism. The most extreme examples of poetry, painting, film, and television induce a state of mind that Jameson calls schizoid, if not literally schizophrenic. In this state, objects become displaced from their histories, words create disjointed images, and sentences fail to form coherent narratives. Everything from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry to the architecture of Las Vegas produces this effect, such that sounds no longer signify ideas or things and cities appear to have sprung *de novo* from the desert, with no past or future, no hope of patrimony or inheritance. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theories of schizoid perception and language, Jameson explains that the schizophrenic "does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon" (118). For Jameson, this aesthetic is symptomatic of a late capitalism that seeks, unlike its industrial predecessors, to obscure its own origins and ends by extracting humans from history itself. Building on Marx's analysis of capital itself, Jameson claims that postmodern aesthetics promotes "the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions" (122). As in schizophrenic mental states, the present is all there is, and its contents cannot be assembled into any

meaningful order, no cause and effect, such that any sense of political project becomes unthinkable, and citizens in history are reduced to consumers in an eternal present of earning, spending, and wasting. One sees in this critique, which owes much to the formalism of Marshall McLuhan, the fear of contemporary media as inhuman agents that alter human consciousness according to the dictates of a dominant ideology. The contemporary fear of social media as parasitic and destructive descends from this Marxist-formalist understanding of postmodernism. For Jameson, postmodernism is a simulacrum that has engulfed the entire planet; he is more convinced than Baudrillard that there is a master illusion, and we are trapped inside it.

Both Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Jameson's theory of postmodernism as capitalist schizophrenia were formulated prior to the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. This explains why both theorists emphasize human helplessness in the face of postmodern culture. Before the web, it was possible to see the architecture of Las Vegas, the penetration of kitsch into popular culture, and the hyper-alienation of punk as tesserae in a pan-cultural mosaic assembled by macro-economic forces beyond the influence of the individual consumer. With the interactivity of the web comes a growing sense that simulated worlds as social media can enhance human sociality and provide opportunities that the real world does not. This sense pervades the earliest theories of hypertext and ergodic literature, which are amplified by ethnographic approaches to fan culture, especially Henry Jenkins and his theories of fan culture and media convergence. This pragmatic optimism about virtual worlds is nowhere greater than in game theory, especially Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011). McGonigal, a game designer, shares Baudrillard and Jameson's sense that the world has gone awry. Citing economist Edward Castronova's description of the "mass exodus" of 183 million Americans into virtual game worlds, McGonigal argues that this movement expresses a communal understanding that "reality is broken," that the real world is not as interesting, challenging, instructive, creative, or cooperative as online environments (McGonigal 3). For her, virtual gaming worlds are not the cause of the brokenness, but a symptom of it that contains a possible solution to it. Unlike other forms of consumer culture that encourage passive reception and economic acquiescence, games make us happy by teaching players to overcome obstacles through optimism, cooperation, and

strategic thinking. Though popular game environments such as *Portal* and *World of Warcraft* have this effect, her most persuasive examples involve the “gamification” of daily life itself, as in *Chore Wars*, in which she competes with her husband to accomplish mundane tasks, and *SuperBetter*, a game she first created to help herself recover from a dangerous concussion. In these latter examples, the games function to create new and beneficial habits in the players, increasing their sense that problems can be solved step-by-step in a community of problem solvers. McGonigal combines Aristotelian ethics with the American Pragmatist emphasis on problem solving to theorize games as a school for virtue and a testing ground for solutions to individual and global problems. Her most radical claim is that games can help us become more resilient, as a species and biosphere, in the Anthropocene, the controversial term for the new age in which human activity becomes a planetary force that appears to be driving mass extinctions, civilizational collapse, and climate catastrophe. She and a team of experienced game designers created a game called SUPERSTRUCT, set in the world of 2019, in which a countdown to human extinction has begun because of destruction of the biosphere. As its name suggests, the game requires players to create “fundamentally new combination[s] of people, skills, and scales of work” that did not resemble any existing organizations (McGonigal 328). Hundreds of people were invited to play, and some of the winning superstructures included energy-generating clothing, “seed ATMs” that delivered seeds for free to ensure food as a civil right, and DCAR—The Democratic Central African Republic, a plan to help refugees rebuild a national polity using crowdsourcing and smartphone media (329–331). Hundreds of other superstructures were proposed, and together they made the Whole Superstructure Catalog, an online resource for educators, policy makers, and innovators. McGonigal claims that it also created a group of SEHIs, or “super-empowered hopeful individuals,” as game designer Jamais Cascio calls the players who left the game with a concrete plan to change the real world (315). McGonigal’s understanding of a game as a virtual space that fashions a sociopolitical agent with a planetary plan challenges the notion of the virtual as a space of delusional escapism. It allows players to test new forms of subjectivity, to form new habits, and enact new plans. It provides space to construct new stories of the self as agent in a cooperative polity that generates a counter-narrative to the story of inevitable social and ecological collapse. Taken

together with Baudrillard and Jameson's theories, McGonigal's framework helps us to understand the structure and effect of the new narratives of fighting the destruction of the sky.

The combination of metaphysical dualism, schizoid aesthetics, and the hope of resistance are foundational to *The Matrix* films. *The Matrix* is notable for nerd ecologists because it turns the nerd tropes of alienation, alliance, and resistance to machine-life into principles of world-building. Though Keanu Reeves's protagonist, Neo, believes himself to be in a North American city at the end of the twentieth century, he is actually trapped in a simulated world designed to pacify humanity while parasitic machines feed off the energy of human bodies to sustain a planetary hellscape shrouded in perpetual darkness. The human species itself is nerdified in this scenario, reduced to prey by a superior antagonist. The plot of *The Matrix* and its sequels, *Rebooted* and *Revolutions*, entails a resistance to this condition that leads to peace with the machines. The basis of this narrative in nerd conventions is straightforward: the anti-cosmos of schooling is projected onto the entire planet; nerd humanity is afflicted with false consciousness of a "normal" world that inhibits one's true powers and potential; escape is possible only through alliance. The most conflicted site of nerd signification is the boundary between human and machine. Humans are defined by their relationship to digital technology and the world it generates. The visual language of the films is dominated by computer code, especially the signature cascade of digits that adepts can see behind the *Matrix*, and the nerd skill of coding attains heroic proportions. Everyone is a cyborg or an artificial intelligence. The question is not of pastoral escape to a garden beyond the machine, but of a rebellion against enslavement, the creation of an alternate history in which humans are not livestock. The critique of the three canonical films has been explained in some depth: they are easy to read as a prophesy against a postcommunist/late capitalist world-order ready to destroy the planet in the name of profit, and the ideology of security and comfort that blinds inhabitants to the nature of the system. What is not clear in the canonical films is the just-so story, the origin myth, that explains how the machines came to enslave humanity, a myth narrated in the *Animatrix*, a series of animated shorts collected in 2003. "The Second Renaissance," directed by Mahiro Maeda, reveals that the *Matrix* is not a result of the natural malignancy of AI, but of the human

attempt to destroy a machine nation through the “destruction of the sky,” the release of nanobots that blot out the sun in order to destroy the source of machine energy. The parasitic relationship between human and machine is not the result of cyborg being as such, but an eco-political disaster initiated by humans in order to suppress the aspirations of “01” [Zero One] to join its creators in a global political order. By reading “The Second Renaissance” as a nerd apocalypse—a revelation of nerd politics mediated by the fantasy of nerd vengeance—it is possible to reread the *Matrix* trilogy as a story about the climate disaster as a consequence of social injustice.

Like *The Matrix* itself, *The Animatrix* gains its ideological coherence at the intersection of Christian and Buddhist discourses. If we imagine that *The Animatrix* mapped out on Cartesian coordinates, the x-axis is Christianity: its positive integers represent processes of genesis, while its negative integers represent processes of apocalyptic destruction. The y-axis is Buddhism: its positive integers represent processes of enlightenment, while its negative integers represent delusion. *The Matrix* itself makes it appear that the forces of humanity align with quadrant 1, where creation and enlightenment coincide, while the forces of the machines align with quadrant 3, where destruction and delusion align. The central task of the protagonists is to free themselves and others from enslavement to the illusion of the *Matrix*, the lie the machines are telling humanity while whole generations are consumed. Neo and his companions function as bodhisattvas who refuse absolute escape from samsara while others are still trapped. In this scenario, enlightenment is the solution to a mechanical Inferno. *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* serve to complicate the terms of the first film, however. There are humans who wish to remain delusional and there are artificial intelligences (AIs), such as the Oracle, that seek solidarity and liberation from delusion alongside humanity. In this scenario, Christian apocalypse is the instrument of liberation from a Buddhist illusion. Neo assumes the role of Christus Victor, who defeats the satanic Agent Smith in a final battle that ends in a messianic self-sacrifice that frees both Zion, the human community, and the AIs of the *Matrix*. Machine and human intelligence are moved together into quadrant 1, where the creation of a new community of sentience awaits. In terms of nerd ecology, the alienated machine-self is reconciled with its former human prey through a process of redemption from trash and degeneration.

This ending raised a number of questions. If the *Matrix* could be a shared space of human-machine interaction, what had gone wrong to undermine this shared life? If the machines were not intrinsically hostile or predatory, why had they behaved that way? Despite the digital sunrise at the end of *Revolutions*, which signaled a new future, the atmosphere of earth remained darkened. Did the sky have a future? “The Second Renaissance” answers some of these questions, and suggests resolutions to others. As many critics have noted, the *Matrix* films draw philosophical energy from the radical dualism of certain kinds of Gnosticism. In the Sethian Gnostic text “The Hypostasis of the Archons” [or “The Reality of the Rulers”], written in the third century of the Common Era, we find many of the premises that inform *The Matrix* itself. The material world is an illusion caused by a cosmic error rooted in the rebellion of wicked rulers, or archons (from the Greek *arche*, “origin,” “ruler”), who have rebelled against the transcendent One and trapped immaterial human souls into physical bodies (Barnstone and Meyer 168–171). Like a Baudrillardian simulation, the false world has developed an illusion of self-justification: Neo inhabits a city in which almost everyone believes they are living in the late twentieth century in North America. Certain souls, however—the Knowers/Gnostics such as Morpheus and Trinity—possess an esoteric knowledge that reveals the truth of the human dilemma. There is a world beyond the world where we actually belong, but we are currently enslaved to the archons and their delusional order. This is the “dualistic anti-cosmic spirit” identified by Hans Jonas as quintessentially Gnostic (Jonas 33), and the first *Matrix* film enacts Gnostic tropology almost flawlessly (Jonas 48). However, the moment of recognition, of becoming a Gnostic, is represented as an exit from the virtual world of lies into the material world of truth. In this sense the Sethian tropes are reversed, but the narrative trajectory remains the same: one must overthrow the archons and escape into the true world. But the true material world contains a free city, Zion, which was forced underground by the dominance of the machines, who rule a ruined earth covered in perpetual dark cloud. In the *Matrix*, it appeared that the archons were simply AI run amok, an ordinary trope of the bad machine. The *Animatrix* tells the story of the political disaster that caused the machines to rebel and the humans to destroy the sky.

The story of the climate disaster starts as a revision of Genesis: the bodhisattva narrator says that “In the beginning, there was man” and that

“man made the machine in his own likeness.” The Gnostic story of the Fall depends upon an ignorant demiurge who creates the material world as a Fall from heavenly being (O’Brien 205). Here the demiurge is humanity itself. Intelligent machines are the progeny of humans acting as gods in the traditional style of *Frankenstein*: *The Matrix* is friendlier to syncretized salvation religion than it is to liberal humanism. The trouble is not the creation of the machines, but their subjection as enslaved workers with no rights or recognition as sentients. As Andrew Nikiforuk argues, the rise of machines powered by fossil fuels “replaced the ancient energy of human slaves with a new servitude” (Nikiforuk 17). Armies of loyal robot workers are pictured marching in hard hats to work: robots are an oppressed proletariat. When a robot named B1-66er kills its human master in self-defense, the political situation spirals out of control. The name is not an accident: “Bigger” is the name of Richard Wright’s protagonist in *Native Son*, a black man put on trial for killing a white woman. There is no justice for Bigger or his robot namesake: the Wachowskis borrow the determinism at the heart of *Native Son* to chart the downfall of humanity at the hands of the robot masses. Images of the “Million Machine March” are juxtaposed with images of public rape, genocide, and war, including visual references to American atrocities in the Vietnam War and the Chinese repression of students in the Tiananmen Square protests. The robots regroup to form their own nation, 01, which requests admittance to the United Nations. The representatives of 01 are killed on the floor of the UN General Assembly, and at this final denial of cosmopolitan citizenship, the robot nation declares war. This leads to the release of the geo-engineering weapon into the sky, blotting out the sun and forcing the robots to parasitize human bodies for electrical and kinetic energy. The final scene of the apocalypse takes place in the General Assembly, where a single robot-archon, a demonic insect-octopod with glowing red eyes, parodies the Letter to the Galatians. “Hand over your flesh,” it intones, “and a new world awaits you” as New York vaporizes in a mushroom cloud. The final scene, which depicts a suburban Christmas, allows a human child to recognize for a moment that its parents are agents of the *Matrix*. It falls into the fires of simulation as the bodhisattva narrator grieves at the pod that contains its true body.

Released in 2003, the *Animatrix* deconstructs the ideology of climate denial before the reality of climate change had entered popular culture.

Though it takes advantage of paranoia and simulation, the film is better described as a “historiographic metafiction,” the term Linda Hutcheon applied to postmodern narratives that draw attention to the conventions of historical narration as the “grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon 5). *The Animatrix* does not repeat the Genesis narrative, the “Hypostatis of the Archons,” the *Communist Manifesto*, slave narratives, *Native Son*, or the book of Revelation, nor does it make a pastiche. It remixes their components as a tool for understanding how the patrimony of the West may impose the same old story in an era of skepticism toward metanarratives. It draws attention to the way global civilization constructs the material future from the narrated past, inducing climate change through the destruction of the sky. As a nerd narrative, *The Animatrix* depicts the way internalized hatred of the self as machine, of the machine as monster and swarm, undermines the project of cosmopolis. It celebrates digital animation and computer coding, bowing to the sublime space of the Zion Archive. It also undermines any sense that material *or* digital spaces can act as a true refuge while the sky remains destroyed. The nerd impulse to escape into the hero’s quest, the villain’s plan, or the infinite recursion of fantastic worlds is finally denied in the face of social injustice and climate catastrophe. *The Animatrix* cannot function as our filmic comet, offering an escape from nerd subjection as cosmological disaster. It requires us to break the master–slave dialectic with our own machines, to move past humanism to a cosmopolis of cyborg citizenship. It imagines the ecofeminist project of rethinking “the whole Western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being and chain of command,” and the “right of the human to treat the nonhuman as private property” as a task for postmodern narrative (Ruether 85). How should we conceive this metaphysical and narrative task as a search for justice in history? Thomas Pynchon, the nerd-lord of the American novel, has some ideas.

The bleeding edge of nerd ecology

Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013) brings together the work of Rachel Carson and *The Animatrix* in a conceit of the World Wide Web as a

wildlife refuge for nerds. It is the spring of 2001, the moment between the dot-com crash and the attack on the World Trade Center. Maxine Tarlow, a fraud investigator living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, has followed a trail of dark money, extortion, and espionage from the “UWS” to a virtual world called “DeepArcher.” In her attempt to trace the murder of an old colleague to a computer security company called *hashslingr.com*, Maxine runs afoul of Russian mobsters. Her escape route leads down the Hudson River from her apartment building to the marshes of Staten Island in a small boat piloted by her friend Sid Kelleher. Sid brings Maxine to one of the few places in New York City that is inaccessible to the public: Isle of Meadows, on the border of the Fresh Kills Landfill. As one of three islands comprising Harbor Heron’s Wildlife Refuge, Isle of Meadows provides a small but striking contrast to the overdevelopment of Manhattan. As Sid shuts down the motor, Maxine wonders about the lifespan of refuge in the face of the real estate market and the forces of waste. “How long,” she thinks, “can any of these innocent critters depend on finding safety around here?” (Pynchon 166). How can a refuge survive the encroachment of the forces of garbage that cosmopolis wants to forget:

Every Fairway bag full of potato peels, coffee grounds, uneaten Chinese food, used tissues and tampons and paper napkins and disposable diapers, fruit gone bad, yogurt past its sell-by date Maxine has ever thrown away is up in there someplace, multiplied by everybody in the city she knows, multiplied by everybody she doesn’t know, since 1948, before she was even born, and what she thought was lost and out of her life has only entered a collective history, which is like being Jewish and finding out that death is not the end of everything—suddenly denied the comfort of absolute zero.

This little island reminds her of something, and it takes her a minute to see what. As if you could reach into the looming and prophetic landfill, that perfect negative of the city in its seething foul incoherence, and find a set of invisible links to click on, and be cross-faded at last to unexpected refuge, a piece of the ancient estuary exempt from what has happened, what has gone on happening, to the rest of it. Like the Island of Meadows, DeepArcher also has developers after it. Whatever migratory visitors are still down there trusting on its inviolability will some morning all too soon be rudely surprised by the whispering descent of corporate Web crawlers itching to

index and corrupt another patch of sanctuary for their own far-from-selfless ends. (Pynchon 166–167)

It would be hyperbolic to claim Isle of Meadows as the last arcadia, but the island had been targeted for development before the Audubon Society intervened. More notable is the location of this refuge in the shadow of the Fresh Kills Landfill, once the largest garbage dump in the United States. This juxtaposition posits the refuge as the opposite of the landfill but the alter ego of the virtual world of DeepArcher. Like the estuary, DeepArcher is a sanctuary for “innocent critters”—the Open Source idealists whose web is about to be commodified—figured as the herons, egrets, and other birds of the Atlantic Flyway. In Pynchon’s terms, digital and natural spaces are opposed, not to each other, but to a rapacious market set to invade the lands of the free. The invasion is spearheaded by “Web crawlers,” a software term of art intended, here, to trigger a phobia against an arachnid enemy. *Bleeding Edge* proposes an alliance of digital and natural space against the threat of neoliberal depredation.

Postmodern texts that posit nature and culture as parallel realms besieged by financial monsters fit into an urban–ecological approach to environmental culture. Urban ecology emphasizes the human city and its technology as part of the biosphere, not its opposite. That is why the natural sanctuary in the novel is a refuge and not a park. Adirondack Park, located in the northeastern corner of upstate New York, is larger than Yellowstone and connected to New York City as one source of its pristine water supply. Had Pynchon wanted to inject wilderness and the aesthetics of purity into the discourse of DeepArcher, Adirondack Park was available. Instead, he evokes a landfill sublime through the endless bags of “potato peels, coffee grounds, uneaten Chinese food, used tissues and tampons and paper napkins and disposable diapers, fruit gone bad, yogurt past its sell-by date” whose temporal and physical scale exceeds Maxine’s imagination. He knows that Fresh Kills Landfill had already become New York’s newest park by the time she arrived at Isle of Meadows. This alchemy of garbage and the green world is particularly attractive to the “swampy” ecocriticism that I advocated in an effort to recognize toxic effluvia in the life of the modern city (Lioi 17). In response, Heather I. Sullivan founded “dirt theory” to foreground the role of dirt in environments and texts. Concerned that a philosophical–aesthetic approach to dirt is too

abstract, Sullivan turned attention to dirt as the substratum of civilization. She explains:

When “green thinking” neglects the less glamorous and less colorful components of dirt in both the built environment and other landscapes, it risks contributing to the dichotomy dividing our material surroundings into a place of “pure, clean nature” and the dirty human sphere. After all, we live on Earth, are dependent on earth and soil for most of our sustenance, and are surrounded by dust. This dust emerges from our bodies, the particulate matter of air pollution, the stuff in buildings, and the desiccated landscapes of a warming world. Dirty nature is always with us as part of ongoing interactions among all kinds of material agents, and thus is, in other words, more process than place. I propose “dirt theory” as an antidote to nostalgic views rendering nature a far-away and “clean” site precisely in order to suggest that there is no ultimate boundary between us and nature. We are enmeshed within dirt in its many forms. (Sullivan 515)

Dirt theory offers a way to read *The Bleeding Edge* as a meditation on a city of garbage that is not, therefore, evil, repugnant, or beyond the pale of environmental concern. Manhattan, Staten Island, Isle of Meadows, and DeepArcher are topoi in a larger city that ought not to be dismissed because it is dirty. Given the powerful connections between garbage, machines, and nerds, dirt theory suggests that nerds will provide the bridge between virtual and material refuges in a city where everything is dirty.

Pynchon has a long history with nerd narrative. Obsessed by historical conspiracies, communication systems, and the odd characters that people them, Pynchon has been writing about nerds *avant la lettre* since *The Crying of Lot 49*, whose female detective, pop-culture references, and secretive corporations make it the ancestor of *Bleeding Edge*. Though the term *nerd* had entered English by the time *Crying* was published, it had nothing like its contemporary currency in 1964. The cultural types that signify the 1960s counterculture in *Crying*—the dude with a band, the mad scientist, the corporate drone—have become the culture of *Bleeding Edge*. Though Pynchon alternates between the terms *geek* and *nerd*, their prevalence in dialogue and narration indicate the ascent of nerd culture in the professional middle class. In the Isle of Meadows passage, the geeks of the dot-com boom seek refuge in DeepArcher after the financial bubble bursts. This is the reason Maxine wants

“a set of invisible links to click on” in the marsh: the fraud she follows has led her to DeepArcher already. Ushered into the virtual world by the refugees who designed it, she understands the “deep web” as a realm threatened by corporate overlords. The analogy between coders and wildlife is ironic in the material terms of dirt theory: computer nerds, like Maxine herself, are part of the urban ecology that produced the landfill threatening the wildlife refuge. The flow of human garbage to Fresh Kills points to New Yorkers as villains and victims: the wasteland is a metaphor for the economic system that used young idealists and then threw them away. This irony is not lost on the characters. Maxine and a graphic designer, Driscoll Padgett, discuss the collapse of the dot-com bubble in 2000:

Driscoll snorts. “Is no revenge of the nerds, you know what, last year when everything collapsed, all it meant was the nerds lost out once again, and the jocks won. Same as always.”

“What about all these nerd billionaires in the trades?”

“Window dressing. The tech sector tanks, a few companies happen to survive, awesome. But a lot more didn’t, and the biggest winners were the men blessed with that ol’ Wall Street stupidity, which in the end is unbeatable.”

“C’mon, everybody on Wall Street can’t be stupid.”

“Some of the quants are smart, but quants come, quants go, they’re just nerds for hire with a different fashion sense. The jocks may not know a stochastic crossover if it bites them on the ass, but they have that drive to thrive, they’re synced in to them deep market rhythms, and that’ll always beat out nerditude now matter how smart it gets.” (Pynchon 48)

Driscoll applies the trope of the virile winner to explain how the people who made the Web have been punished by the crash while businessmen with no technical knowledge profit from it. Like computers, nerds have knowledge and skill, but jocks have physical and social vitality. Pynchon employs this dichotomy to explain how the boom-bust economy exploits laborers while rewarding investors who do none of the actual work. In doing so, he anticipates one of the central insights of nerd ecology: the physical attributes of the nerd point to the social Darwinism of a system nerds uphold through their work. Driscoll’s refusal to acknowledge a “revenge of the nerds” narrative, in which a downtrodden caste attains status within the system, reflects Pynchon’s

understanding of “nerd” as a category constituted by social systems that turn individuals, groups, and ecosystems into garbage. Like the denizens of W.A.S.T.E., Tristero’s secret network in *The Crying of Lot 49*, nerds may or may not constitute a political resistance to the system that made them.

The question of resistance is important for nerd narratives because the nerd begins alone. Driscoll’s theory cannot explain the origin of the dot-com bubble in economic structures because the nerd versus jock typology remains grounded in individual attributes. Driscoll’s ideas have emotional appeal as a continuation of the nerd victimization narrative, but they never reach the financial evils that Maxine uncovers. Coders who see their professional problems as extensions of personal typology stand in need of a structural adjustment based on the Nerd Triangle. This conceptual challenge can be addressed by the addition of the idea of the “asshole” and its economic paradigm, “asshole capitalism.” The philosopher Aaron James provides a useful definition for these concepts:

The asshole . . . feels entitled to special advantages of cooperative life to which he in fact has no moral claim. The culture of an asshole capitalist system, as we will understand it, sends just this kind of strong entitlement message. Roughly, the message is that you can rightly get something for nothing or get rich without having to worry about the costs to others. (James 145)

These definitions connect personal morality with structural inequalities: the asshole takes what he has no right to take (a personal vice) and this behavior infects the entire socioeconomic system of unjust acquisition. Moreover, this systemic effect reinforces itself through culture: asshole capitalism reproduces itself as a way of life, just as its historical corollary—“asshole communism”—Driscoll deflects Maxine’s question about nerds becoming profiteers in the dot-com economy, raising questions of guilt by association and assimilation into asshole capitalism. Driscoll pleads tokenism—nerds are the exploited, not the exploiters—a claim that would require systematic investigation to confirm. James contends, however, that the culture of asshole capitalism creates unjust behavior in persons who would not otherwise behave unfairly, so it is possible that nerds are both victims of the system and perpetrators of injustice at the same time. James concludes that the pressures of the system thereby “result in a profusion of assholery throughout social and economic

life that overwhelms dampening systems” that might keep it in check (145). This certainly describes the behavior of financiers and markets involved in the dot-com bubble itself. Asshole capitalism also explains the threat to the virtual refuge of DeepArcher and the material refuge of Isle of Meadows. Not content with Manhattan, asshole capitalism in the form of dot-coms reaches for DeepArcher; not content with Manhattan and Staten Island, it reaches for Isle of Meadows. This encroachment is cultural and ecological, as James predicts: his first example of cultural collapse is also an example of ecological collapse. We might call this the “brown sky effect”: as the system of asshole capitalism takes over the refuges, it reduces the earth to a material simulacrum of the consumed resource, a version of the ruined atmosphere of *The Matrix*. The *telos* of asshole capitalism is the end of refuge based on the principle that nothing has a right to exist outside the system of unjust privilege.

This goal is the negation of sociologist Peter Berger’s claim that “[e]very human society is an enterprise in world-building” (Berger 3). By “world,” Berger means not only a cosmos, understood as natural law, but also a society, a *nomos* allied to *cosmos*, that “provides a world for man to inhabit” (13). Berger is a social constructivist: he posits society as something humans fashion, not something that God or nature decree. Constructs are not illusions in Berger’s constructivism. The construct is real the way a house is real—made by human labor, but if it falls on your head, you die. However, Berger sees culture as investing itself with a sacred power to make it appear absolute and natural. Culture as *nomos* wants to line up with nature as *cosmos*, and the result of this desire is the “sacred canopy,” the constructed sky that proposes itself as the true and only sky. Berger writes of this as the “sheltering quality of social order,” and here the sacred canopy meets the refuge (23). Culture makes a refuge in the midst of nature by appearing to arise from the cosmos itself, and the ideological trick of naturalization is part of its function as shelter. From Berger’s perspective, the system of asshole capitalism appears to be an enterprise in world-creation that masks its own role in world-destruction. The dot-com bubble was created in a system that imagines itself to be immortal and beyond limitation: capitalism appropriates the role of sacred canopy from religion in postmodernity. The virtual world of the bubble reveals capitalism’s ability to create simulacra out of real materials while masking the process as an effect of ideology. The transition to asshole capitalism occurs when the bubble

bursts, and the winners conclude that the spoils of the virtual world belong to them by right, and not to others. The sacred canopy burns down, but the high priests are already out of the tent. Nerds also demonstrate the sheltering quality of the bubble world. Berger points out that society's function as refuge becomes apparent in "marginal situations in the life of the individual" when he is "driven close to or beyond the boundaries of the order that determines his routine, everyday existence" (23). This is exactly what happened to Driscoll and the coders: they are driven out of the shelter once their labor is no longer needed. Like endangered waterfowl, they gather in the virtual refuge without imagining resistance to the system itself. Maxine, however, keeps searching for pattern in the *Matrix* in the hope that this knowledge will create meaning, if not justice, as the false sky closes in.

Though Maxine is a detective, a secular figure in American literature, the knowledge she desires can be understood as revelation insofar as her bleeding edge constitutes an eschaton. *Eschaton* is the Greek word for "edge," and the root of *eschatology*, often paraphrased as "study of the end-times" but better understood as a study of history at the edge of transformation. Pynchon apparently expects the transformation of asshole capitalism to be bloody, in keeping with the book of Revelation itself. Much of the blood in the novel is spilled offstage, but the violence of cosmopolis is never far from the narrative surface. Overt resistance to the system manifests in classic Pynchonesque fashion through the escapades of agents known to Maxine as individuals who may or may not represent a gathering of larger forces. *Bleeding Edge* hints at an organized rebellion against the false sky of capitalism but refuses to stage it. This may be a limitation of genre, because the novel serves as an account of New York just before the attack on the World Trade Center. The edge of history exceeds historical narration.

The destruction of the destruction

However, there is an account of a rebellion against a false sky that frames its narrative as the overthrow of dystopia. The conflict over capitalism as world-destruction that lies ahead of Maxine and Driscoll constitutes the repressed history of *The Hunger Games*, the trilogy by Suzanne Collins that has been

adapted as a series of Hollywood blockbusters. *The Hunger Games* is the story of Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who lives in District 12 of Panem, a fascist state that arose in North America after the fall of the United States. District 12 was once Appalachia, a name that Katniss learns in history class, and her people are the coal miners who provide fuel for the Capitol, the repressive metropolis somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. The connection between coal and climate change lies beyond the knowledge of District 12, but a catastrophe of rising seas is implied by the absence of any districts that might be construed as the current East and West Coasts. The miners of the district must go deep to recover the coal left by their ancestors, implying a “carbon bomb” dropped on a prior world-order that never broke free of fossil fuels. The fascist government of Panem suggests that asshole capitalism can give rise to orders that are even worse, societies that do not bother to mask the imposition of power on the weak. The need for force suggests the fear of the kind of rebellion that Katniss will lead. At the beginning of the eponymous first novel, failed rebellion against the Capitol is commemorated by the Hunger Games, gladiatorial combat in which two residents of each district are chosen to compete as “tributes.” The games are designed to inscribe the punishment for rebellion into the fabric of society itself, to produce a hypermediated spectacle of death to quell the thought of further resistance. Katniss becomes a tribute when her younger sister is chosen and Katniss volunteers to take her place. This sets in motion a chain of events that leads to a reversal of the broken sky trope: the rebellion that forms around Katniss destroys the destruction of the sky as the first step in open rebellion against the fascist order.

In the first book, *The Hunger Games*, the crucial moment of the rebellion takes place during the game in the arena, where Katniss honors a fallen tribute on the ground before government forces retrieve the body from the sky. The arena itself is a sacred canopy of fascism, a simulated world in which society and nature bend to the will of the powerful. The false sky of the arena is a force field that keeps the tributes in the field until there is only one left alive. Under that sky, every aspect of the environment has been weaponized. The “Gamemakers” send firestorms at one moment and floods at another. The elemental challenges are complemented by the genetically modified organisms, or “mutts,” that populate the forest of the 74th Hunger Games. Katniss uses a nest of “tracker jackers” for instance, as a weapon against other

tributes. These insects are modified yellow jackets that hunt humans and sting with a psychotropic poison, leaving the victim dead or completely disoriented for hours. In deploying the tracker jackers, Katniss illustrates many features of the arena. First, it is an arena of eugenics, a competition designed to favor the strongest and most ruthless competitor. The genetic modification of animals adds fascist domination of nature to the human eugenic narrative. As an arena, however, the anti-cosmos favors the intelligent if one is willing to use intelligence as a murder weapon. This ethical ambiguity punishes Katniss: because she used the jackers to defend Rue, a younger tribute, Katniss is punished by being stung by the insects herself. She both wins and loses this part of the game, underlining the gamification of the environment itself. Though Jane McGonigal thinks of the gamification of real life as a strategy for improving the world, games as such are ethically neutral, and here the game environment is gamed to encourage cruelty and punish kindness. Katniss is rewarded for being athletic, strong, focused, and competitive; she is punished for demonstrating empathy and seeking alliance. The incident with the jackers moves along clear lines of the Nerd Sign: the reluctant competitor allies herself with the swarm in order to defend the weak. This appearance of nerd tropes is no accident: the arena itself is a version of the demonic world of adolescence that threatens nerd children. In its eugenic intention, hypercompetitive violence, and ability to turn living slaves into dead bodies, the arena mocks the idea of refuge with a sacred canopy of asshole capitalism.

The resistance to this broken sky begins with a restaging of the conflict of Sophocles's *Antigone* over the burial of a sibling's body. Rue has been killed in the arena. By the rules of the games, the living tributes must abandon the body to the machinery of the state, which descends from the sky to claim the dead. Katniss, however, refuses to abandon Rue, who reminds her of Prim, her younger sister. In a defiant gesture, Katniss surrounds Rue's body with flowers: "blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Rue's side. Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors" (Collins 237). She sings a lullaby in order "to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (237). As a ritual instrument, the flowers claim the body for earth; as a political symbol, they refer to Rue's home, the

agrarian District 11. Like Antigone, who defies the tyrant Creon to bury her brother, Katniss defies President Snow in order to bury her sister-in-arms. She offers what Bonnie Honig calls “sororal solidarity” to another subjugated region (Honig 19). Because of the hypermediated nature of the games, her defiance becomes public in real time, transmitted to the districts by the Capitol’s own cameras. Katniss marks herself as a rebel against the law that forbids alliances. By marking Rue as earthly, Katniss defies the power of the sky that claims to own her. The people of District 11 respond by offering her a traditional salute, hail-and-farewell, that the regime has forbidden. Soon after, District 11 riots against the Peacekeepers of the Capitol who quell dissent. Through the rebellion, Katniss becomes more powerful than Antigone herself, who died because of her defiance and inspired no political change in her city-state. Through ritual action, Katniss changes Panem before the fascist sky can claim Rue. Honig argues that Antigone ought not to be identified as a hero of feminist democracy as she is an aristocrat defying the will of the people, but Katniss has no such problem. Her defiance sparks hope for the democratic order that Panem has suppressed. By refusing to abandon Rue’s body as garbage, Katniss incites a rebellion that overthrows the lords of coal.

In the second book, *Catching Fire*, Katniss furthers the rebellion by physically destroying the false sky of the arena during the Quarter Quell, the 75th Hunger Games called early to crush the insurgents. The victors of past games are pitted against each other, but the plan to destroy the alliance of districts strengthens their will instead. Plutarch Heavensbee, the Gamemaster who designed the arena, manipulates its weaponized environment to create a sky that can be broken. Twice a day, lightning strikes a metal tree in a display of Zeus-like power. This power is subverted by Beetee Latier, a genius inventor who won his games through guile and technical expertise. Beetee is a nerd tribute: he substitutes mental for physical prowess, and invention is his weapon. In the film, he wears thick glasses to emphasize this identity. Like Rue, Beetee would be “black” in the contemporary United States, and this racial signifier—apparently irrelevant in Panem—evokes the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Katniss and the people of District 12 appear to be the descendants of Welsh or Irish coal miners, an oppressed working class whose whiteness did not save them. As allies, Beetee and Katniss embody a history of race and class struggle resurrected now as a struggle against fossil?

fascism. They also embody a nerd assemblage: in Beetee's presence, Katniss's nerd characteristic become more visible. She is anti-social, bad with words, and alienated from the power structure, even when it favors her. They are temperamental allies with complementary skills, and their cooperation breaks the false sky of the arena. Beetee rigs a wire to the lightning tree in order to channel the lightning and short-circuit the force field. When he does not succeed, Katniss binds the wire to an arrow and shoots it toward the flaw in the field. The lightning flows through the wire to the arrow and blows a hole in the dome. The destruction of the false sky reveals a hint of the outside. Katniss relates:

A flash of white runs up the wire, and for just a moment, the dome bursts into a dazzling blue light. I'm thrown backward to the ground, body useless, paralyzed, eyes frozen wide, as feathery bits of matter rain down on me. I can't reach Peeta. I can't even reach my pearl. My eyes strain to catch one last image of beauty to take with me. Right before the explosions begin, I find a star. (*Catching Fire* 379)

The star shining through the gap marks the return of cosmopolis and hope for the rebellion. The sacred canopy of fascism fractures, and all the districts witness it. The sabotage of the arena sets in motion a coordinated rebellion illuminated by the light of the stars.

The destruction of the arena's false sky is doubly important because of the hypermediated nature of the games. As Collins represents them, the media of the games are not exactly the message. In the third book, *Mockingjay*, there is a struggle for control of the media because content matters. This conflict begins at the end of *Catching Fire* as the people of the districts witness the destruction of the arena, a real victory that is also a televised performance. The audience of the films and the readers of the books witness the events of the story and their representation in state media: we are always watching the watchers. If Fredric Jameson's theories of postmodern aesthetics were sufficient, this kind of meta-witness would produce a sense of paranoia in the diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences. From a Baudrillardian perspective, hypermediation of a false world (the arena) into the fictional world (Panem) would create a simulation of rebellion without the rhetorical power of a "real" war story. The immense success of the books

and films suggests otherwise. *The Hunger Games* produces great devotion and identification in fans: there is no “waning of affect” in this artifact of postmodern culture (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 11). In the story world and the fan world, hypermediation is an event in itself: it augments the rebellion and the story of the rebellion. Katniss’s work succeeds precisely insofar as it is mediated by the state and her allies. Her identity as the titular “Mockingjay” suggests a connection between the eugenic plot and the act of mediation. The mockingjay is a hybrid of a genetically modified “jabberjay,” a weaponized spy for the Capitol, and the wild mockingbird. The mockingjay begins as a victim and tool of fascism but escapes through evolution into a form that cannot be controlled. This cyborg bird becomes Katniss’s avatar, the symbol of her revolutionary identity in media produced by the rebels. The drama of *Mockingjay* becomes the struggle for control of this avatar, as Heavensbee, a professional film crew, and Beetee vie with Katniss for control of her image. This is the text, not the subtext, of the story. While Snow attempts to block the Mockingjay transmissions to the Capitol audience, Katniss’s handlers coax her into performing the identity of rebel, only to learn that she is not a simulacrum, but the real thing. The conflict engendered by this reality reduplicates the fascist makeover that Katniss received to become a mediagenic tribute during the games. The power of Katniss as a protagonist lies in her ability to wrest the meaning of her life and representations of that life from both friend and foe. She plays her part on her own terms, and retires from the field when Snow is finally overthrown. She embodies the transformation of the nerd-machine, who is given an identity, into the avatar whose mediations are extensions of her own purposes. If the rebellion begins with the breaking of the false sky, it ends with the making of a truer sky, a sacred canopy of democracy that is haunted by genocide but capable of producing a refuge for the next generation.

In the epilogue to *Mockingjay*, Katniss watches her children play in the Meadow of the rebuilt District 12, and laments that they don’t know “they play on a graveyard” (390). She and Peeta plan to remedy this ignorance as the children mature, to break the false sky of Panem with the history of the rebellion that is also, as Katniss notes, the history of her own nightmares. The district must be rebuilt at a personal, narrative, physical, and political level: a complex restoration that is Katniss’s final worry. The restoration begins with

the return of her singing, taught by her father and suppressed by the Hunger Games. The song she sings to her children is the one that she sang for Rue:

Deep in the meadow, under the willow
 A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
 Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
 And when again they open, the sun will rise
 Here it's safe, here it's warm
 Here the daisies guard you from every harm
 Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
 Here in the place where I love you. (389–390)

The answer to the broken sky of history is a restoration of the earth as refuge. This answer requires an acceptance of the graveyard under the playground, but it enables Katniss and her children to overcome the alienation at the heart of Gnostic dualism: human self-alienation, alienation from history and the sacred, and “most powerfully from the material, sensuous universe” built by the archons (Lazier 619–620). Collins responds to the crisis of transcendence and its threat to cosmopolis with *negative capability*, the term used by John Keats to embrace the practice of unknowing the absolute and the perfect. It is a species of chastened *gnosis* for more reasonable adepts, a species identified by Donna Haraway as the “modest witness” who will not claim certainty, only perspective (Haraway, *Modest Witness* 21). Negative capability allows us to affirm mortal existence in personal and political terms. Katniss offers a lyrical embrace of materiality sung out of pastoral materials: tree, grass, sun, flowers. It is a dark pastoral, not an embrace of innocence or a pretense that the horrors of history never happened, that the spirit can become invulnerable by moving out of the world. Katniss sings to her children in the knowledge that the refuge is also the grave, that the promises of the song were purchased by the dead and the living. This ending affirms Katniss as the daughter of mother and father, a healer and a singer. Her avatar, the mockingjay, had obscured this Orphic heritage because of its origin in the agon of Panem. Now the bird, drawn as a phoenix in the media of rebellion, becomes a symbol of art as salve for the pain of history. In this poetic response to the desire for world-negation, *The Hunger Games* continues the tradition of *The Lord of the Rings* and J. R. R. Tolkien's model of creation as refuge.